

SHORT STORY

A SLIGHT ACHE

Or; The Trials and Tribulations of Ned T. Willoughby, M.D.

By Jayden Vaughan

Ned T. Willoughby was making faces in yesterday's snow. Frost had formed on both sides of the car window and Willoughby was dragging a finger across the inside pane. He had to sit up on both knees in order for his head to meet the window. In the short distance he had ridden, Willoughby had created a panoramic view of the various people that populated the world within this square pane. Some faces he invented, but others were modeled after those he had seen in his short time alive. Off in the bottom right corner, there lay a crooked circle with small dots surrounding the eyes and mouth. The muse for this piece was an acne-ridden convenience store clerk who had mocked Willoughby for being unable to reach the checkout counter. Willoughby had created the face in the clerk's image, and surrounded it with a few other circles intended to be wearing masks, carrying knives and crowbars.

The world beyond his window was a landscape of greys and whites, blurred and rushing by fast. Sometimes the car would stop and the transparent faces in the window would have their features filled in by things such as trees and buildings. The deity of their world was well-acquainted with what objects would appear where, and had carefully selected the clerk's corner to be mostly occupied by city dumpsters and refuse piles. The circles knew they were in the hands of an angry god.

At the front of the car, the radio was playing. Baroque strings and harpsichord keys filled the vehicle, giving Willoughby's creation myth a distinguished air. Soon enough, the car had stopped at its destination. He took a final look at his work from the inside. Behind the clerk's face was now some sort of electrical device on a telephone pole, the lightning bolt on it giving him an almost virile-looking scar. Forcing the door open with both hands, Willoughby leapt out of the car, feeling himself sink slightly into the snow on the ground. He raised his tiny fist and rubbed it violently against the window pane and its civilization, sparing nobody in the holocaust of his wrath.

He had lost a few inches of height in the snow. Plodding along, he made his way across a sidewalk and onto a courtyard that lay in front of a brick building, its red color darkened by the glum haze of the weather. Around it were the children who went to school there, small dots swarming around and buzzing with conversation. Willoughby continued walking along silently to the entrance of the building, where an orange glow threw itself on the white ground, along with the shadows of adults who haunted the doorway. They were conversing about things he did not fully understand but with words he had heard tossed around before, about mortgages and income tax and various types of diseases. He was stomping briskly through the last stretch of snow when he felt a chilly wind whistle by his ear. The snowball had missed its target and hit the brick building instead.

“You’ve gotta lead it,” he heard a familiar voice say with a squeal.

“You gave me a dud,” said another

And right after came the third, most recognizable one.

“Chalk it up to the fog of war.”

Willoughby turned around slowly and awkwardly, each face appearing one-by-one. The snowball chucker had been Rufus Snodgrass, a small child with flat, ginger hair and a miniscule head that was still too big for its body. Next to him was the snowball supplier, Jeremiah Fisk. If Willoughby had drawn him on the window, his head and body would have both been circles. At the end of the procession was Tom McNally, an otherwise unremarkable save for a plucky smile and a chipped front tooth that always went with it.

“War’s hell, Ned,” said McNally, “Get what I mean?”

“Who gave you that face, Willoughby,” asked Jeremiah, with a gleam in his eye signaling he knew it was rhetorical even if he didn’t know the word. “Was it your mother?”

Rufus followed suit.

“I’ll bet it was his mother.”

“You’re as ugly as they come, Ned. Get what I mean? You’re like rheumatism. Ned. Get what I mean?”

“Where’d you get rheumatism from. Ned? Miss Willoughby have it?”

“I’ll bet she does.”

“You’re like astigmatism, Ned. Get what I mean? That’s the one for eyes.”

“You’re the plague. Willoughby. You disgust me,” Jeremiah cast some spittle into the snow.

“I take it you’re scared of whatever lives under your bed, only there’s nothing really under your bed, only because there’s a mirror and you’d have to see yourself instead, Ned. Get what I mean?”

“It’d be way scarier that way, Willoughby.”

“I’ll bet there’s a mirror under there. A mirror or his mother.”

“Animal,” belted Jeremiah.

“Freak,” said Tom, with his lip curling back onto his chipped tooth.

“Freak,” Rufus concurred.

Tom glared at his accomplice.

“I already said ‘freak.’”

Willoughby had turned around and started walking to the steps again long before the greeting ended. He had got what they meant. The words stabbed the back of his head like daggers, and once the barrage was done he was struck by the next best thing they could find. A snowball had forcefully planted itself on the back of his head, launching the rest of him face down in the snow. He picked himself up and, shaking the chill from his body, tried to ignore the laughter piercing the air and remember the sweet music of strings and harpsichords instead.

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Now, Ned T. Willoughby was laying in bed when the clammer of an alarm sent a shaky, metallic ringing through the air. His eyelids had to be heaved up, his body hoisted, then turned at the sufficient angle to let his legs fall out of bed and do most of the heavy lifting from there. Ned decided to let the alarm ring, for fun. He fiddled his hand around the nightstand in hopes of hitting his glasses, which had grown a few bottle-sizes over the years and were therefore easier to find. Soon enough, bull's-eye. His legs let him lurch into the bathroom and ready his toothbrush. The mirror had fallen sometime ago -- how long, Ned lost track -- so often opted for glancing out the window instead. Today, it was filled with frost.

He was more than familiar with the drill, and got to rinsing in under three minutes. Keeping time with the alarm clock, he knew this was a personal best and felt a slight sense of anticipation for the day. Missus Willoughby was lying in bed and blindly craned a hand out from under the covers and let it fall on the alarm clock in hopes of switching it off. It found its target after five attempts.

"Jesus, Ned," she said, "have mercy on me at least. It ought to play some nice music or something."

The Willoughbys ate breakfast together - flapjacks, to be exact. Ned disliked them, they melted like ashes in his mouth and carried an aftertaste that lingered bitterly for sometime afterwards.

"Are the flapjacks good?" Missus Willoughby asked.

"Yep," said Ned.

As Ned fought with one of twenty-seven striped maroon ties, Missus Willoughby was ogling out the icy window. The weather was overcast and dreary, the kind of weather that people might suffocate under.

"Sure is cold out." she said.

"Yep," Ned agreed.

He lumbered over to the calendar and flipped through the pages to reveal the current day, circled in bright red marker. His eyes widened to fill his enormous glasses, his mouth cooked a little to reveal a few teeth as white as snow, and he gained enough strength to win the battle against the striped maroon tie. He had read about the things adrenaline could do to a person in a medical journal once and knew this must be a clearcut case of it. Missus Willoughby looked away from the dour view outside to see a patently energetic Ned.

“Neddy, do you really have to run to work today? It must be bitter out.”

“And leave some poor soul to suffer any longer? I wouldn’t dream of it. You know how I am. A patient may not always stick out his neck for me, but I put mine on the line for them. Where would they be without Ned T. Willoughby?”

He said the last part in an almost sing-songy tone that made Missus Willoughby smile.

“I know how you are. That’s my Ned. The bleeding heart, always doing what he can. They ought to have a statue of you in bronze.”

She slunk over to the window again, peeking out drearily.

“Still though, it looks so bitter out there. Doesn’t it look so bitter out there, Ned?”

He had already leaped for the door and jerked it open by the time she asked, and was now hovering halfway between in and outside.

“Plum miserable,” Ned replied.

His body was wholly outside now, but his mind still loitered back in the house. He started walking through the snow regardless as he knew that if he waited for his mind to return to him he might’ve stood on the front porch until the end of time -- or, at least, until he froze to death. So he walked. A great enormous cataract hung over the world. The kaleidoscopic colors chosen apparently by some hidden neighborhood echelon had been, in rough order of prominence; taupe, beige, grey, greige, dead tooth alabaster, and a light butterscotch brown. In fact, if Ned had lost his sense of temperature and his glasses, he might not have known there was snow at all. But there was, and the biggest hint of it was that there was nobody else out but him. It was like an enormous white

shroud over a world that hadn't made itself decent yet. Only a few black, fallen tree limbs poked through and a sulking grey sky lay overhead. Missus Willoughby had been right. It was bitter out. But that never bothered Ned. He wouldn't have worn an overcoat at all if his job hadn't required one. His mind was still back in the house with her, and he was thinking about what she had said; *only bronze?*

Ned made his way around the winding sidewalk, all the way to the modest one-story office building that lay off to the side of a transistor yard. He felt a twinge of guilt every time he came round the final bend in the sidewalk and laid eyes on it, for that invisible echelon had gotten their hands on his building as well and made it a cream-colored fawn. He tried to be consoled by reminding himself that it was built long before he worked in it, and that he felt he had done his best to give it some life and soul on the inside, where things truly counted. *Home is where the heart is*, Missus Willoughby would've told him.

"Only bronze..." Ned repeated aloud to himself.

He continued forward to the entrance where a small fluorescent lamp was making its light and buzz clear from the inside. Footprints made out of small white flakes lingered in front of the door. He had not been as early as he thought.

Enoch, Ned suspected.

Scuffing his shoes on the mat for a few seconds, he then pushed aside the door and went in. The aroma of sterile equipment and disinfectant greeted him first, followed by the less agreeable sight of an uneven-looking face at the receptionist desk. Sitting in a chair nearby was a small, crying child with a swollen red face holding onto an older woman who was staring blankly at the spartan white walls. Ned passed the two of them to lock eyes with the receptionist, clad in blue scrubs and wearing a chaffed name tag proudly displaying, *Hello, My Name is ENOCH*.

Enoch was fiddling with a large decorative plastic tooth and did not notice Ned until he spoke up.

"Enoch," Ned said.

The young man finally looked up from the tooth.

“Oh, hello, Mister Willoughby. Gee, you’re here later than usual,” Enoch announced in his warbly voice.

“I must’ve hit the snooze button on my alarm,” Ned glanced around the lobby with a hurried look on his face. “Is my eight o’ clock here yet?”

“Well, seein’ that it’s eight o’ clock, he sure is. Got here mighty early.” After saying this, Enoch looked back down at the large plastic tooth.

“Molar,” he said suddenly.

“What?” Ned asked.

“His molar. Said something about his molar when he came in,” Enoch replied without looking at Ned, “He was pointing to his mouth when he said it so I couldn’t make out much. Only the word ‘molar.’ And something about George Washington.”

Ned’s gaze turned to the corridor and followed it down where the door to his operating room was. He started speaking before his eyes had returned to Enoch.

“I may need to operate on it. A root canal, possibly. Did he mention anything about pain?”

Enoch thought on this for a moment.

“It’s hard to say. He was comfortable enough to mention George Washington.”

“May need to be operated on,” Ned said absentmindedly, “could be back there a while.”

Enoch was tossing the tooth in the air repeatedly now with the nonchalant skill of someone who had practiced tossing a tooth in the air repeatedly before.

“That’s fine, that’s a-okay with me. Ol’ Enoch will hold down the fort while you’re back there in the trenches. All that drilling, pulling, tweezing...”

The little girl with the swollen face started crying louder after Enoch said this. Ned turned to him and delivered a stern frown.

“This is a dental office,” he said, “not Sodom and Gomorrah. You remember that.”

Enoch stared silently down at the desk, defeated. The tooth landed in his hand and did not get tossed back up.

“And put that down,” Ned said, “That’s the life and soul of this office.”

He considered commenting on Enoch not wiping his shoes on the mat, but decided it was a good thing his face at the receptionist desk had not come as a surprise.

Ned strode down the corridor and passed a bureau with a glass of lollipops on it. Grabbing one without looking, he started eating it. He stood in front of the door awhile, waiting for his mind to catch up.

Once the door was open, he saw him, reclining in the dental chair, the man dressed in a grey two-piece suit with a napkin in his collar, beaming back at him. The teeth in his face were square and brilliant, save for one lone chipped tooth.

“What’s up, doc?” McNally shouted jovially.

“Gets funnier each appointment, McNally,” Ned replied.

The chair was swiveling a little, but McNally kept his eyes and smile locked onto the dentist.

“Well, you know me, doc. Can’t stay away for too long.”

Ned let the chewed up stick once belonging to a lollipop fall into the trash can. He made for the counter where he kept the rubber gloves, while McNally did most of the talking.

“You know, you really did a number on my kid. He got home from his appointment, he was raving about it. Now can’t decide whether he wants to be a dentist or an ad executive. That crazy kid, he’s goin’ places.”

Ned was rolling down a glove over his left hand.

“Now, for my part, I told him to try his hand at the oral medicine game, become an artist with a dental drill. Like you, Ned. See, he’s really just humoring me with that ad exec stuff, ‘cause he just wants to follow the same line as his old man. But I told him, ‘There’s no pride in being an ad exec. Why don’t you try your hand at the oral medicine game. Like Ned is in.’”

The buzz of fluorescent lighting filled what little silence there was.

“Oh, Ned, before I, uh, forget,” McNally hesitated, “We got this new dental plan down at the agency, so if I pay you with a little less money than last time, it isn’t because of, uh, anything but--”

Ned interrupted him by holding up a gloved hand.

“I’m not in the oral medicine game for the money, McNally.”

McNally let out a laugh so boisterous it must’ve been building steam inside him.

“Hah! That’s good to hear, Ned. Always good to hear. That fella you’ve got out there, Eustace, told me it wouldn’t be a problem, but I just wanted to hear it straight from the horse’s mouth,” McNally reclined back even further, his posture taking on a now philosophical air. “Horses’ mouths,” he said, “so dirty, am I right? Good thing we’ve got dentists to make sure we don’t share the same fate. Heh! The way I see it, there oughta be a gold plaque out there with your name on it.”

Ned spoke this time without turning around, finessing the other glove securely onto his hand.

“Thanks, McNally. But I don’t go in for plaques, it comes with the job.”

McNally’s laugh was so strong he had to readjust his napkin.

“Didya hear that! ‘Plaques!’ Hah! The doc can take ‘em and he can dish ‘em right back! That’s great, that’s real great. I’ll have to tell the kid that, the future little dentist.”

Ned was sitting down in the chair next to him now, eyeing the tools on the nearby tray.

“No sirree, no pride like a dentist’s pride,” McNally carried on, “You know, I’ve always thought this country was built on dentists, that behind every great man was a guy with a white coat and dishwater.”

The chair jolted upward at an awkward but steady rhythm with the pressure of Ned’s foot on the pedal. He pressed a switch to recline it at a horizontal angle suddenly and stuck a small mirror inside of McNally’s mouth, which was still moving.

“Ooo take a guy like George *Wassington* for instance...”

The mirror found its way to the back row of McNally’s upper teeth where it showed a tiny, murky black fissure that ran jaggedly along a molar like a black lightning bolt on a white sky. It was a cavity. Ned retracted the mirror and sat back up with a disappointed look.

“The way I see it, he would’ve never made it to office if he hadn’t gotten those chompers. You try gumming the inaugural speech, Ned. You try it and see if they don’t laugh you out of the building...”

“Have you been eating candy, McNally?” replied Ned as he lowered the small mirror back onto the tray with a lethargic turn.

“Huh? Oh. yeah, I guess a little. Whatever junior doesn’t eat. That crazy kid, he’ll make a great dentist someday. Some kids want to be President, junior on the other hand...” McNally stopped to ponder something. “Actually, come to think of it, I don’t think a-one of the Commander-in-Chief’s ever did do tonsil work beforehand. They’d probably let anyone sit in that seat before your kind. Ned. Typical, really.”

Ned sighed. “It’s all the same to me,” he said, “everyone books an appointment eventually.”

“Yeah,” McNally responded with a wistful tone, head facing the ceiling, “I guess that’s pretty much the truth when you get right down to it. Well, if a dentist ever does run, yoo can bet your bottom dollar one registered voter is showing up.”

“Right,” Ned said, swiveling the tray of elaborate tools off to the side.

“Me,” McNally added, “Get what I mean?”

“Thanks.” replied Ned. “I got it.”

For the first time since Ned had entered the room, possibly for the first time since McNally had entered it, there was silence covering every square foot.

“Ned, uh...” McNally had to clear his throat. “Am I doing better, Ned?”

“Sure you are, McNally.”

Ned’s hand was reaching for a drill that rose above both of them. He found it fast and switched it on. The machine came to life with a harsh whirr, as if it had been aching to start.

McNally looked at Ned, eyes widened. If he had on Ned’s glasses, they could fill the bottle sizes twice over.

“Anaesthetics!” he cried.

“Fresh out,” Ned replied, “and no word from the people who make them.”

McNally’s eyes darted around the room until they finally met the drill approaching him. His face changed to a shaky, bright maroon, like a disturbed child had colored it in with a red crayon.

“Jesus, Ned. Not again, please. Oh, God--”

Ned narrowed his eyes straight at McNally’s, his hand keeping the drill on its unwavering, inevitable course.

“*This* is God.”

He guided the drill over the chipped tooth and let the mechanical whirring fill McNally’s mouth. And what came out of it was like music - sweet music.

THE END

A FABLE

THE PERFECT SHADE OF EGGSHELL

Vidal Jenkins awoke one morning to a color he had never seen before pouring through his window. It was indescribable, existing somewhere between bluish-greenish and yellowish-brownish, with hues of other nameless colors mixed in for good measure. He got dressed in his dull-colored clothes and almost caused an accident on the road after being too distracted by new colors to obey the traffic light. The Sun, in particular, had become the most perfect shade of eggshell he had ever seen. He walked into the spartan white lobby of the optometrist's office, who, after an examination of probing his eyes and his mind, recommended him to a psychiatrist. Vidal Jenkins walked down the street and sat down on a bench, staring off into the bluish-greenish, yellowish-brownish sunset.

THE END